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New Questions for Radioactive Cleanup at San Francisco
Dockyard



Drydock Four, Hunters Point Naval Shipyard (file image)

BY **MAREX** ([HTTPS://WWW.MARITIME-EXECUTIVE.COM/AUTHOR/MAREX](https://www.maritime-executive.com/author/marex)) 2018-10-31 21:34:00

The U.S. Navy's controversial nuclear cleanup project at the Hunter Point Naval Shipyard in San Francisco faces a new set of allegations. This week, an environmental watchdog group alleged that in addition to previous concerns about falsified tests, the Navy is using outdated, inadequate standards for acceptable levels of contamination after cleanup.

Like other Cold War-era nuclear research sites, Hunters Point carries a legacy of hazardous pollution. Shortly after World War II, the yard was used for the attempt to decontaminate target vessels from Operation Crossroads (<https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/video-bikini-atoll-70-years-later>), the series of nuclear bomb tests that the Navy conducted at Bikini Atoll in 1946. Crossroads was abandoned mid-series because of severe nuclear contamination on board vessels exposed to the blasts. Several of these ships were towed back to San Francisco, where they were subjected to sandblasting (https://www.bracpmo.navy.mil/content/dam/bracpmo/california/former_naval_shipyard_hunters_point) and other experimental cleaning methods at Hunters Point in an attempt to find (https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/large/documents/fulltext.php?fulltextid=27) techniques for decontamination.

From Operation Crossroads until 1969, Hunters Point was home to the Naval Radiological Defense Laboratory, a facility for the study of nuclear contamination and the biological effects of radiation. Much of the laboratory's effluent was dumped at sea at the Farallon Islands Nuclear

Waste Site, but hazardous radioactive contamination from its work remains at Hunters Point. The Navy, under the oversight of EPA and state regulators, has been cleaning up the site for decades.

The exact amount of the contamination at Hunters Point is still unknown. According to the research group Committee to Bridge the Gap - headed by the former director of the Environmental and Nuclear Policy Program at UC Santa Cruz, Daniel Hirsch - 90 percent of the sites at the former shipyard have not been sampled to determine the extent of the pollution. At many of the sites that have been tested, the EPA believes that the Navy's environmental science contractor, Tetra Tech, falsified 90-97 percent of its data. This April, two of the firm's technicians were sentenced to eight months in prison for falsifying records. Both admitted that they had dug up clean dirt outside of the facility and used it as a substitute for their soil samples.

This week, the Committee to Bridge the Gap alleged that in addition to the testing scandal, the Navy's goals for remediation are based on outdated cleanup standards from the Cold War era, not the legally-mandated, modern standards used by EPA. Government documents show that for contaminated buildings, the Navy deployed a 1974 guideline written by the long-defunct Atomic Energy Commission. For contaminated soil, it is using standards dating to 1991.

The science of assessing the risk from radioactivity has changed over the intervening years, and researchers now believe that nuclear materials pose a higher risk than once believed. The outdated soil guidelines are hundreds of times less protective than current EPA standards for the radionuclides plutonium-239, thorium-232 and radium-226, according to Committee to Bridge the Gap. For radium - the most significant hazard at Hunters Point - the Navy's cleanup target would accept contamination about 900 times higher than the EPA standard, and nine times above the EPA's upper limit for acceptable risk.

The EPA told NBC Bay Area that it has asked the Navy to use "current versions" of standards for radioactive cleanup at Hunters Point. A Navy spokesman said that the service stands by its existing cleanup standards, and that they have passed muster with experts from multiple regulatory agencies.

The cleanup effort at the Hunters Point site is proceeding by parcels, and a private developer has already built and sold several hundred condominiums on decontaminated land. The first residents moved into the development in 2015, but the EPA halted further land transfers the following year, citing a need to determine the "actual potential public exposure to radioactive material" at the site.

The opinions expressed herein are the author's and not necessarily those of The Maritime Executive.